

Solomon Islands post-RAMSI: falling down in bits and pieces

Author : Transform Aqorau

Date : November 4, 2013



How does one evaluate RAMSI? I am not sure how, although there are various reports, consultancies and surveys that have attempted to address this question. These reports have endeavored to evaluate the effectiveness of RAMSI against the three pillars of its stated mission, namely: a) restoration of law and order; b) improving the machinery of government; and c) promoting economic growth. There is, however, little independent, evidence-based, critical research that has been carried out on RAMSI's approach and operations, and their impact on people's lives and the public service. Perhaps some research has been done, but these papers are not accessible to the public because they are owned by RAMSI. Much of the research that has been done on RAMSI to date has been individual perspectives, rather than research based on a program to uncover tangible evidence about the effectiveness of RAMSI. This short discourse is intended to add to the ongoing debate about RAMSI.

I would argue that it is not easy to measure RAMSI's effectiveness across the three pillars, or to make specific conclusions on the efficacy of RAMSI's operations over the past ten years. This is because people's views of the efficacy of RAMSI are often subjective and influenced by perceptions of, and interactions with, RAMSI personnel. The examples given below illustrate this point.

The first example is café proprietors who set up business specifically to cater for expatriates who want a nice, comfortable, posh place to have coffee. They would argue that RAMSI has been good for business because it has made the demand for such facilities economically viable. Solomon Islanders, on the other hand, who probably want to also have a nice cappuccino and a slice of cheese cake, but cannot afford the exorbitant price that these café's charge, would argue that RAMSI has helped inflate the price of a cup of coffee and therefore effectively pushed them out of the market. They would take a different view of RAMSI.

The second example is home owners who rent their homes at exorbitant rates to RAMSI personnel. They would argue that RAMSI has had a positive impact on the local rental market because it has created a demand for good quality houses that they rent at rates that they would not otherwise have been able to. Solomon Islanders, on the other hand, (many of whom are public servants) would have a negative view of the impact that RAMSI has had on rental prices because they are pushed out of the market and therefore have to live in overcrowded conditions with relatives. They too would have a different view of RAMSI.

The third example is those who view the restoration of law and order, especially the presence of the Participating Police Force (PPF) alongside the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIP Force), as having enhanced the effectiveness of the rule of law. They would argue that RAMSI has restored law and order and helped the RSIP Force regain its credibility. Solomon Islanders, who may have experienced the heavy handedness of RAMSI personnel in various operations, may take a different view. They would argue that RAMSI is biased, culturally insensitive and heavy handed in their approach to carrying out investigations. Thus, as a result of their personal experiences, they may have a different view of RAMSI.

These examples illustrate the bias with which individuals may view RAMSI. As alluded to earlier, this might originate from the nature of their interaction, personal experiences and personal circumstances. All these experiences help shape people's attitudes and perceptions of RAMSI.

I would argue that because perceptions of RAMSI are subjective, it is unfair to evaluate it on the basis of what has been achieved in terms of the three pillars. RAMSI's performance should rather be evaluated around the question of what the Solomon Islands are like in 2013, taking as a yardstick the three pillars. In addition, I would argue that RAMSI was not established to solve Solomon Islands law and order, governance and economic problems. RAMSI was established to provide a conduit through which Solomon Islanders would address these problems. Thus, the question that should be asked is not how well RAMSI has performed, but rather how well successive Solomon Islands governments have performed since 2003.

There are different ways in which this question may be answered that are also subjective. I do not claim patent over the way I attempt to answer these questions because my views are also subjective, but I will offer them nonetheless as a basis for discourse. How well successive Solomon Islands governments have performed may be evaluated against the following factors:

- a) what impact has law and order had on governance;
- b) what improvements have been made to the machinery of government; and
- c) how have living standards improved, resulting from economic growth.

What impact has law and order had on governance?

I would argue that overall this has been positive. There is a semblance of law and order, the RSIP Force is visible at times and generally available most times, and government systems are generally functioning. However, these gains are being negated by the way state agencies like Members of Parliament (MPs) are appropriating limited state resources for themselves. In this regard, it may be argued that whereas former militants held Treasury to ransom at gunpoint, MPs are holding Treasury to ransom through legislation and the Budget. The only difference between the two groups is the *modus operandi* through which Treasury is being held to ransom but the impact on the economy and the lives of Solomon Islanders is the same. Furthermore, whereas former militants demanded inflated overtime allowances for keeping Honiara "safe", MPs are demanding more of the state's limited resources for themselves in the name of "constituency development". MPs have not restricted their insatiable greed only to the Rural Constituency Development Fund (RCDF). They are packaging funds for tourism, cocoa, cattle and fisheries, and legitimizing it under the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) Act. This kind of behavior has a percolating effect on other elements of the public sector because it originates from the highest echelons of the Government. Other state actors, like the provincial governments, are also imitating what national MPs are doing. I would also argue that other state agencies, like the RSIP Force, are also being compromised because of the behavior of MPs. Unfortunately, all the good work that has gone into restoring law and order is being undermined by the very people that were elected to uphold the rule of law, demonstrate respect for the rule of law and apply the rule of law without fear or favor. MPs have instead undermined the rule of law and given themselves power over the way millions are spent in ways that are disproportionate to the needs of Solomon Islanders. The increasing misapplication of these rules is evident, *inter alia*, in the delays in allowances for students, the declining standards of medical services, and the poor state of roads and state assets. I would respectfully argue that while there has been a positive effect with regard to pillar one, it is unfortunately being negated and abused (*albeit* legally through Acts of Parliament) to the economic and social detriment of Solomon Islanders. To that extent, the answer to the first question might be law and order has had a somewhat

positive impact, which is unfortunately being undermined by poor governance.

This is the first in a two part series. The second part, discussing the machinery of government and economic growth in the Solomon Islands, is available [here](#).

This post continues our series looking at the [Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands](#) (RAMSI) as it marks its tenth anniversary (23 July 2003), and enters a new period of transition (1 July 2013). The series is collected [here](#).

Transform Aqorau is Chief Executive Officer of the [Parties to the Nauru Agreement](#) (PNA) Office, Marshall Islands. Native to the Solomon Islands he has studied in PNG and Canada, and holds a PhD in Law from the University of Wollongong. He has worked as a legal adviser to the Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. This post represents his views and not necessarily those of PNA.